

Catch a Falling Star

WE'RE GOING TO MAKE YOU A STAR. By Sally Quinn. Simon & Schuster. 256 pp. \$7.95

By ANNE CHAMBERLIN

THERE IS A CRITICAL moment, when you've been badly hurt, when you need every friend you can find. Not to comfort you—but to save you from yourself. If you threaten revenge through the mails, they should steal your stamps. If you try to get your own back in print, they should take your typewriter away. You should be kept in seclusion, heavily veiled, until your scars have healed. As my brother once said, when the boom split my head open in a sailing race: "For God's sake, don't bleed on the sails."

Sally Quinn was hurt by CBS. They hired her to coanchor their "Morning News" program. They told her they'd make her a star. (And they were not the first.) But instead, she bombed. Live. Right in the kitchens and bedrooms of countless unwashed Americans, as they gulped prune juice, shaved, scratched and pulled the curlers out of their hair. She quit before she was fired, got her old job back at The Washington Post, with her name in lights. But she still felt humiliated and wronged, with the thirst for vengeance of a woman scorned.

She says she learned early "to be sure not to make the wrong friends," and she collects a whole pantheon-full wherever she goes. Warren Beatty gives her advice; Henry Kissinger laughs at her jokes; she calls John Chancellor "Jack." But where were they all when she sat down to write this book?

If she could have waited until her cool came back, she might have written the "hilarious, self-mocking, incisive" account that the book jacket describes. As it is, she self-inflicts more damage than CBS could have wrought with an axe. A spoken blunder—even on network television—fades into the ozone faster than you think. What you say in cold type goes into your permanent file.

And in this book she not only runs verbatim transcripts of every witless comment she ever made on the air, she reprints her nastiest press notices and shares every wounding detail of a New York Magazine profile she is still trying

to live down. Her purpose is to show how she was misquoted and misunderstood and to shift the blame for her television disasters to the vulgar, inept, fear-ridden, sexist CBS producers and executives, who never prepared her for her job, ignored her suggestions, wrecked her self-confidence, and damaged her health. But instead of demolishing her tormentors, she sounds tedious, petty and plaintive, a cross between Sammy Glick and Tess of the d'Urbervilles, and she'll hate herself in the morning.

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But maybe she won't. Waiting for perspective is not Sally Quinn's style. She's a golden creature of a new generation, with no time for faltering or doubt, or the other fuzzy obstacles strewn in life's path. Her story—including the fact that she wrote it at all—illuminates the fathomless gap that separates her world from the one that some of us are accustomed to. It is a frustrating tale, because she keeps ignoring the warning signs and missing all the exit ramps as though they didn't exist. She seems to laugh at the wrong times, just as she did on the air, and when she notices her mistakes, she doesn't seem to learn from them.

She is an "Army brat," she tells us, the daughter of a distinguished general whose career was ended, she explains, by press reports that he was leaking intelligence to Barry Goldwater, a family friend. She never had to learn humility, because a general's daughter is a princess on an Army post. ("The ass-kissing is blatant, calculated and expected," as she says.) And there was always a new country to move to before remorse could set in.

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She went to 22 schools and 5 high schools, was a "hopeless student" and graduated, unabashed, "at the exact bottom" of her class at Smith. What she learned best was "a rather scientific sense of observation . . . a natural instinct (and subsequent disgust) for the most sophisticated and subtle social climbing."

She doesn't mind work, but when the challenge wears off, or the drudgery sets in, she moves on to something else. Or flies off to Spain or California until her money runs out. She's always been ready to dive off the high board and cope with the swimming part later. It's a beguiling trait in these cautious times, and brings out the Pygmalion in the employers she meets. She was hired as a writer by The Washington Post when she'd never written before in her life, or even read very much, as far as I can tell. But she'd had a "marvelous interview" and "nobody's perfect," as one of the editors said.

They sent her out once with an experienced reporter, then gave her a barrel and pushed her over the falls. As she was later to do at CBS, she served her apprenticeship in the center ring, with the whole Establishment watching. But Washington is more forgiving than New York, and a

typewriter gives you more time to collect your wits than an open mike.

Her writing was "not terribly professional at first, to say the least," as she says. But she was a refreshing presence in the newsroom and quick to learn the jungle ways, to "find the most important powerful person and stick close. You'll get the best quotes, and you won't miss any from the star." She was good at making people talk, and poured her whole notebook—crumbs, coffee stains and all—into the typewriter with a candor that jarred the molars loose. The British Ambassador was almost recalled after her interview with his wife. Henry Kissinger let slip that he was a "secret swinger." ("That

was it for Henry.") She herself "began to be seen as a personality rather than just another reporter" and "liked to watch people at parties debating whether to avoid me or suck up to me."

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She put her head down on her desk and sobbed when she learned that she was hired, and there is a sort of maddening illogic to everything else that ensues. She seems to be looking at what is happening without really seeing. Like a President we used to have, she keeps taking the blame, but somehow it's not her fault. "Why did I do it?" is followed by: "Why did they let me?"

She writes and talks with the four-letter vocabulary of the day, and warns CBS that she is "controversial, opinionated, flip, open and had no intention of changing." Yet she feels shocked and betrayed when she sounds that way in print. "Instead of sympathy for being caught in a corporate disaster and for my own lack of experience, I got destroyed, almost always in a personal way..."

She scorns convention in her free-wheeling personal life, which she has "no intention of hiding," but weeps into the transatlantic phone when a CBS producer propositions her in London, and blames part of her poor showing at Princess Anne's wedding on his pique at being rejected.

She scoffs at the ludicrous folkways of television, but reports getting drunk every day at lunch, just in order to be able to fall asleep afternoons so she'll be alert for the next broadcast, while her homework piles up and her skin breaks out and her health is wrecked.

She keeps asking herself "how CBS could have made so many mistakes; how they could have let me go on the air with no experience." Yet when the man who hired her asks: "What if I had told you we wanted to make you the anchor on the 'Morning News' but that you'd have to have about three to six months' training on one of our local stations first. Would you have done it?" she replies, "Of course not."

If you don't keep a firm grip on yourself, you might almost sympathize with CBS. □